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K. Hazel Kwon

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A Paradoxical Mind Shift as a South Korean Experiencing the North Korean Threat

K. Hazel Kwon¹

It was during an ordinary dinner with my in-law family when I read the news about North Korea's most recent nuclear test. There were four of us sitting at the table: Myself, a South Korean living in the U.S., whose parents and sisters still live in my home country; my mother-in-law, named Sung, who is a daughter of parents who fled North Korea during the Korean War; and my husband John, sister-in-law Helen, and her husband Jay, all of whom became naturalized U.S. citizens at a young age. They have seldom or never visited Korea since.

To the majority of Americans, we may all look like the same "Koreans." Maybe if they had dinner with us that evening, however, they would realize how different "Koreans" are from "Korean Americans" when observing the context on how either group responds to North Korea.

As soon as I read the news about the nuclear testing, the first thing I did was text my family and friends who live in Korea. I asked about the overall vibe of the country. At the dinner table, my mother-in-law, Sung, was anxious. She began to raise her voice about how cruel and terrible the North is. She criticized the lukewarm attitude the South Korean government poses towards the North. In my opinion, this is not true; the South Korean government is taking a pretty hard line on this issue. My mother-in-law's abhorrence toward the North is inherited from her father, who suspected that the remaining family he had in the North must have been executed under Kim's regime due to their capitalist status.

Meanwhile, the rest of my family members -- John, Helen and Jay -- hardly cared about the news. Instead they shifted the topic towards Hurricane Irma, which had just hit one of the Caribbean islands they had visited several years ago. I think their "whatever" stance summarizes the opinion of most Americans, for whom international politics is far from their concern. It was only me and Sung who felt anxious and worrisome about North Korea's nuclear tests.

¹ Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, and Mass Communication, Arizona State University

What struck me the most, however, was not the indifference that John, Helen, and Jay showed at the dinner table. It was the texts I received from my family and friends living in South Korea. Here are a few examples: “We’re fine and just happy that weather is beautiful these days.” or “I heard about it, but who cares?” or my favorite, “Everyone is too busy to talk about North Korea.” Our weather woes were so popular I even got some responses saying “I’m more worried about your safety from Hurricane Harvey. Are you ok?” My friends have no idea how far Arizona and Texas are from one another. More importantly, no one seemed to care about North Korea at all, and my personal contacts were not an exception. According to a report in HuffingtonPost Korea, Korean citizens in general were surprisingly calm – or indifferent.

Why are South Koreans-living-in-South Korea indifferent, whereas South Koreans-living-in-the U.S., like me and Sung, seem to be more involved or concerned about North Korea causing trouble? Is it because the threat is not real? I don’t think that is the answer.

The Korean peninsula is a small piece of land, with the distance between Seoul (the capital of South) and Pyongyang (the capital of North) of only about 120 miles. They are closer to each other than the distance between Phoenix and Sedona. The underground nuclear test that Kim Jung Un carried in Pyongyang on September 3rd was reported to have generated ripple tremors on the soil of Seoul. The damage to the entirety of South Korea will be unfathomable if there is warfare.

Desensitization may explain why indifference is prevalent in South Korean society. I think another important reason is the sense of powerlessness that the citizens collectively experience. South Korea is in armistice with North Korea, and thus technically in the middle of war. Nonetheless, the country does not have much leverage in deciding the course of the situation. Most importantly, the fate of the Korean peninsula is primarily at the hands of the superpower nations; in particular, the U.S. and China.

Even though South Korea is physically the closest to North Korea, and thus would be severely damaged if warfare occurred, the country has always been the last player in the game. Moreover, the U.S. has still not transferred Wartime Operational Control to South Korea, which means that it would be the U.S., not South Korea, who has the top-level commandship if a warfare occurred in the Korean peninsula. In South Korea, you don’t need to be an international relations expert to know that their government has the least influence when it comes to determining their own fate. The collective understanding of the geo-political power play makes them feel powerless.

The “power” of powerlessness is making people indifferent. This is why South Koreans-living-in-South Korea respond to North Korea issues with the “whatever” view, similar to most Americans who don’t find any relevance of these issue in their life. In contrast, as a South Korean living in the U.S., I feel a sense of power, like there is a way to control North Korea. This feeling could be drawn from the exposure to the U.S. media coverage, which conveys more proactive tones when framing who is responsible for dealing with this issue. Even if I am currently far from the conflict physically, my psychological distance has become closer to the conflict due to this sense of control. The media may be overplaying which country has the real leverage on the issue; the sense of

control could be an illusion. But at least it motivates me to follow up more closely on how the U.S. and other international societies respond to these issues.

It's a paradox that South Koreans-living-in-the U.S. are more attuned to the issue than South Koreans-living-in-South Korea, where they live right at the region where this tension and conflict is happening. This paradoxical mind shift reminds me that the fate of the Korean peninsula is gravely influenced by the geo-political strategy that the U.S. is leading in that region. It is important for U.S. citizens to be aware that the U.S has a responsibility for the geopolitics in the Korean peninsula. I hope they take a more proactive view by following up on whether the U.S. government has a responsible diplomacy in place, in a manner that makes the best out of collaborating with allies, including South Korea, when dealing with the North Korea issue.